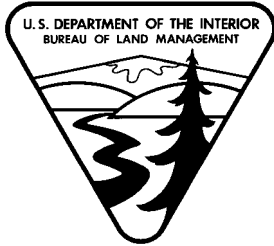




U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Arizona State Office

Tucson Field Office

June 2002



Proposed Las Cienegas Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement



The Bureau of Land Management is responsible for the balanced management of the public lands and resources and their various values so that they are considered in a combination that will best serve the needs of the American people. Management is based upon the principles of multiple use and sustained yield; a combination of uses that take into account the long term needs of future generations for renewable and nonrenewable resources. These resources include recreation, range, timber, minerals, watershed, fish and wildlife, wilderness and natural, scenic, scientific, and cultural values.

BLM/AZ/PL-02/004

Proposed Las Cienegas Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement

Prepared by

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Tucson Field Office
Arizona

June 2002

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This Proposed Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) describes and analyzes four alternatives for managing the public lands and resources within the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (NCA) and the Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District.

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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The proposed Las Cienegas Resource Management Plan is a complete plan for managing the 49,000 acres of public land, resources, and uses within the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (NCA) and Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District (See Chapter 1, Map 1-1). This plan differs from traditional BLM plans in two important ways. It was developed through a collaborative public planning process, and it is designed to use principles of adaptive management.

Through this document we are making land use plan decisions, including desired resource conditions, land use allocations, special designations, and land tenure decisions for the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area and public lands within the Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District. The management actions in this plan include many of the actions traditionally found in the following documents:

- Watershed management plans
- Wildlife habitat management plans
- Cultural resource management plans
- Allotment management plans
- Recreation management plans

The plan is also integrated with a ~~draft~~ **final** environmental impact statement (**FEIS**) that describes the potential environmental impacts of the proposed Las Cienegas Resource Management Plan. We have prepared this Resource Management Plan and **FEIS** according to the requirements of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

PURPOSE AND NEED

The Las Cienegas NCA was designated by Congress in December 2000 in order to conserve, protect, and enhance the unique and nationally important aquatic, wildlife, vegetative, archaeological, paleontological, scientific, cave, cultural, historical, recreational, educational, scenic, rangeland and riparian resources and values of the public lands within the NCA. The act establishing the Las Cienegas NCA directed BLM to prepare a comprehensive management plan for the long-term management of the public lands within the NCA within two years of designation.

The Las Cienegas Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement has been prepared to guide and implement management for the public lands within the Las Cienegas NCA and Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District to ensure that these resources and values are protected and to resolve issues associated with management of the public lands within these areas. The issues and the planning process are described in more detail later in this Chapter. Chapter 5 provides additional details on the planning process and public input. As specified in the act, the Draft Las Cienegas Resource Management Plan was prepared from a draft of the Empire-Cienega Management Plan, which was in preparation when the NCA was designated, and in accord with the resource goals and objectives developed through the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership process.

CHANGES TO THE DRAFT

Changes made to the RMP/EIS since the draft publication are identified by a highlight (**highlight**) or strikeout (~~strikeout~~) for the convenience of the reader. These markings

Summary: Planning Area-Planning Issues

indicate updated, corrected, or additional information. A new chapter has been added, Chapter 6, which documents the comments received on the Draft EIS and BLM's responses.

THE PLANNING AREA

The Empire-Cienega Planning Area encompasses 266 mi² (170,558 acres) in southeast Arizona, roughly bounded by Interstate 10 on the north, Arizona State Highway 83 on the west, the Whetstone Mountains on the east, and the Audubon Society's Appleton-Whittell Research Ranch on the south (See Chapter 1, Map 1-2). The Planning Area includes both the Las Cienegas NCA and Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District.

Together, the Las Cienegas NCA and Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District encompass much of the upper Cienega Creek watershed, which is important to Tucson for flood control and aquifer recharge. The area also has the following attributes:

- Five of the rarest habitat types in the American Southwest: cienegas, cottonwood-willow riparian areas, sacaton grasslands, mesquite bosques, and semidesert grasslands.
- Habitat for several endangered species.
- A site on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Two proposed wild and scenic river segments.
- Scenic open space.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

We prepared this plan using several of the outcomes of the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership (SVPP). The SVPP is a voluntary association of federal, state, and local agencies, organizations, and private citizens who share a common interest in the resources and management of the public lands within the Sonoita Valley, an area that includes the entire upper watershed of Cienega Creek. Chapter 1 describes in more detail the SVPP collaborative planning process and its outcomes.

PLANNING ISSUES

Twelve major planning issues were generated for the Empire-Cienega Planning Area from initial public scoping, the collaborative planning process, and BLM interdisciplinary team members. These issues can be grouped into three categories relating to (1) desired future conditions, (2) land use allocations, and (3) special designation areas. Additional implementation issues were also generated under each of these broad categories.

DESIRED RESOURCE CONDITION ISSUES

- Issue 1: Upland Area Management
- Issue 2: Riparian Area Management
- Issue 3: Fish and Wildlife Management
- Issue 4: Visual Resource Management
- Issue 5: Cultural Resource Management
- Issue 6: Maintenance of Desired Economic and Quality-of-Life Conditions

LAND USE ALLOCATION ISSUES

- Issue 7: Development of Salable, Locatable, and Leasable Minerals
- Issue 8: Designation of Utility Corridors
- Issue 9: Off-Highway Vehicle Designation
- Issue 10: Designation of Recreation Zones
- Issue 11: Livestock Grazing

ISSUES RELATING TO SPECIAL DESIGNATIONS OF PUBLIC LANDS

- Issue 12: Designation of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE

Regardless of the alternative chosen, BLM's management of public lands and resources is governed by many laws, regulations, and policies. Although not all of these can be summarized in this document, Table 2-1 summarizes the major laws, regulations, and policies that apply to the resources and proposals being analyzed in this RMP/FEIS. Appendix 2 describes the major resource programs and management guidance in more detail.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Actions proposed in this document will apply only to public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

DESIRED FUTURE CONDITIONS

The SVPP developed a vision, goals, and resource objectives for the Sonoita Valley area

(roughly the upper Cienega Creek basin and small portions of the upper Babocomari and Sonoita Creek basins) to be incorporated into planning efforts for the valley. As a participant in the planning partnership, BLM has incorporated the vision, goals, and objectives as the foundation for the Las Cienegas Resource Management Plan. Each action alternative is designed to achieve or maintain these future conditions by meeting resource objectives.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

We have separated the descriptions of the alternatives into two parts in the RMP/FEIS. Part A describes the desired resource conditions, land use allocations, special designations, and land tenure decisions which are part of each land use plan alternative. Part B describes the resource management actions which would be implemented under each alternative.

LAND USE PLAN ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1 (No Action) (Current Management)

Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative, would continue current management. Current management has been ongoing under the interim management guidance for the Empire-Cienega Planning Area included in the Phoenix Resource Management Plan (BLM 1988) and the interim grazing plan (BLM 1995). The management goal for the area as stated in the interim management guidance is to "preserve, protect, and enhance the property's multiple use values. These values include an extensive riparian area, presence of an endangered species, outstanding small and big game habitat, magnificent open space, and potential for dispersed recreation activities such as hiking, horseback riding, camping, and picnicking." Under current

Summary: Alternatives Considered

management, desired resource conditions include an emphasis on federally listed threatened and endangered fish and wildlife and significant cultural properties. Land use allocations are limited to continuing the existing livestock grazing leases and continued closure to mineral exploration and development of lands acquired before the enactment of the Federal Land Exchange Facilitation Act of 1988. Alternative 1 would not designate utility corridors, ACECs, recreation zones, or an Arizona Trail corridor. As the baseline against which other alternatives are compared, Alternative 1 is required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The Action Alternatives (Alternatives 2, 3, and 4)

The three action alternatives differ from current management in several ways. Under all three, desired resource conditions would include maintaining or achieving goals and objectives for the planning area developed by the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership. Management under all three alternatives would emphasize the following:

- Conservation of four rare vegetation communities and 18 associated priority species.
- Retention of the scenic values of the landscape.
- Preservation, adaptive restoration, or scientific investigation of significant cultural properties.

The action alternatives propose differing land use allocations for mining, utility corridors, recreation zones, corridors for the Arizona Trail, and grazing. Each alternative would make special designations for areas of critical environmental concern (ACECs). Each

alternative would implement the Las Cienegas Acquisition Strategy.

Alternative 2 (Agency Preferred)

Alternative 2 emphasizes ecosystem management and the use of partnerships and collaboration during implementation to achieve desired resource conditions. Biannually, a Biological Planning Team would collaboratively evaluate monitoring data and issues relating to livestock grazing, recreation, and wildlife management for the primary goal of maintaining or achieving desired resource conditions. BLM would designate all public lands within the planning area as an area of critical environmental concern (ACEC) to protect sensitive riparian and wetland habitats. Livestock grazing would continue on public land allotments, but grazing operations would incorporate variable stocking rates and flexible rotations. BLM would designate two utility corridors and a corridor for the Arizona Trail and would close or restrict the use of some roads to provide a mix of motorized and non-motorized recreation while ensuring that desired resource conditions are met. *This alternative is also preferred by participants in the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership.*

Alternative 3

Alternative 3 proposes the greatest mix of land uses with restrictions to protect sensitive areas. It would designate two ACECs to protect sensitive riparian and wetland habitats. Livestock grazing would continue on public land allotments, but current livestock grazing operations would be modified by reducing livestock numbers to conservative fixed stocking rates and establishing structured pasture rotations rather than variable stocking rates, seasonal use, and flexible rotations. BLM would designate three utility corridors and a

Summary: Management Actions - Environmental Consequences

corridor for the Arizona Trail. Alternative 3 proposes fewer road closures and restrictions than do Alternatives 2 and 4 with emphasis on a mix of motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities. Alternative 3 would also limit camping to designated sites on the most acreage.

Alternative 4

Emphasizing land use closures and restrictions and limits on development as the approach to achieving desired resource conditions. Alternative 4 is the most restrictive of the alternatives. It would provide for the following:

- Public lands would remain closed to mining and would be closed to livestock grazing.
- All public lands would be designated as an area of critical environmental concern.
- A single utility corridor would be designated for major utility lines.
- The Arizona Trail corridor would use the existing road system and require shared use of motorized and non-motorized travel.
- More roads would be closed or restricted than under any other alternative.
- Both mechanized and motorized vehicles would be restricted to designated routes.
- Recreation developments would be limited to the smallest area.
- More area would be designated as recreation Zone 3—open to dispersed recreation with fewer restrictions—than under any other alternative.

MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

There are four alternative sets of resource management actions which would be implemented under each alternative. The management actions for Alternative 1 are limited to management actions included in the existing interim grazing plan and project-by-project considerations for other resource programs, including cultural resources, wildlife, and recreation. The management actions for Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 include a common series of actions to meet the desired resource conditions for upland and riparian vegetation, wildlife habitats, visual and cultural resources. The management actions for Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 vary mainly by the alternative proposals for implementing livestock grazing decisions and recreation management.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Table 2-32 in Chapter 2 of this document summarizes the potential environmental impacts of the four alternatives. Detailed descriptions of impacts of the four alternatives are provided in Chapter 4. The impacts depict the projected changes that would occur to the environment if the alternative was implemented.

Chapter 4 also provides a description of cumulative impacts, irretrievable and irreversible commitments of resources, and unavoidable adverse impacts of the alternatives. The cumulative impact analyses address the degree and extent of the cumulative impacts on the environment. Cumulative impacts include the impact on the environment of incremental changes from various actions when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable changes. Cumulative impacts can also result from individually minor, but collectively significant, actions.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

Chapter 5 provides information on public involvement in the planning process. Also included is a summary of BLM's coordination with state and federal agencies. Chapter 6

documents the comments received on the Draft EIS and BLM's responses.